

Five Whys Root Cause Analysis (RCA)

An RCA is a structured, systematic approach used to identify the underlying factors that contributed to an event. This may involve actual harm, a near miss, or a confirmed quality-of-care (QOC) concern. Tools such as the **Five Whys** can help your team uncover process gaps or system failures that led to the event. The outcome of this analysis supports the development of a **Causal Statement**, which clearly links a specific cause to its effect and resulting undesired outcome.

When performing an RCA using the Five Whys, it is essential to move beyond surface-level answers and continue probing until you identify the true underlying cause of the problem. A common mistake is stopping too early or assuming the first answer is correct. If the actual process or system failure does not get addressed, the same events are likely to recur.

Steps to Complete the Five Whys:

- 1. Clearly define the problem.**
Write a concise statement describing the specific issue in the first box (e.g., harm event, near miss, QOC concern).
- 2. Ask the first “Why.”**
Ask why this problem occurred and record your answer in the first “Why” box.
- 3. Continue probing deeper.**
Take the answer from the first “Why” and ask why it occurred. Record this response in the second “Why” box.
- 4. Repeat the process.**
Continue asking “Why” for each subsequent response, drilling deeper into potential contributing factors. Repeat until you identify the root cause—the underlying process or system failure that led to the event.
- 5. Know when you have reached the root cause.**
Although this method is called the Five Whys, you may reach the root cause in fewer or more steps, depending on the complexity of the problem.

Once you have identified the root cause, develop a clear and concise Causal Statement. This statement provides the foundation for creating an effective action plan by ensuring that corrective strategies directly address the true source of the issue rather than just its symptoms.

A well-written Causal Statement includes four key components:

- **Process Break**—Where the breakdown occurred.
- **Cause**—The underlying factor that contributed to the event.
- **Effect**—The impact of the cause.
- **Event**—The resulting outcome.

Example:

Five Whys RCA	
Responsible Party: Quality Lead	Date: 1/1/2026
Problem 1:	An 85-year-old patient with a history of dementia experienced a fall and fracture after being admitted with pneumonia.
1st Why:	A patient fall-risk assessment was completed upon admission, but corresponding interventions were not implemented (e.g., call light in reach, purposeful rounding, improved lighting, placing items within reach, etc.).
2nd Why:	The patient was not placed on high-risk fall precautions in the electronic health record (EHR) despite screening positive on the fall-risk assessment.
3rd Why:	The results of the fall-risk assessment were not fully reviewed by the admitting nurse during admission documentation due to competing clinical priorities.
4th Why:	There is no standardized double-check process or automated EHR alert requiring nurses to confirm initiation of fall-risk precautions for high-risk patients.
5th Why:	The fall-prevention program has not been updated to incorporate EHR-based safety checks, and staff have not received recent training on integrating fall-risk screening with clinical workflow.
Causal Statement:	Fall-prevention interventions were not initiated for a high-risk patient <Process breakdown> because the fall-risk assessment results were not reviewed and acted upon during the admission workflow<cause>, resulting in fall-precaution measures not being implemented <effect> leading to the patient experiencing a fall with fracture <event>.

Five Whys RCA Templates:

Use the template below to answer the Five Whys and complete a Causal Statement for each identified QOC from the Final Determination Letter.

Five Whys RCA	
Responsible Party:	Date:
Problem 1:	
1st Why:	
2nd Why:	
3rd Why:	
4th Why:	
5th Why:	
Causal Statement:	

Five Whys RCA

Responsible Party:	Date:
Problem 1:	
1st Why:	
2nd Why:	
3rd Why:	
4th Why:	
5th Why:	
Causal Statement:	